Civil society, community participation, and the search for sustainable development: Questioning the categories and underlying concepts of a popular discourse

Geiser, Urs

Globalization and National Policies: Some Concerns

Civil society, community participation, and the search for sustainable development: *Questioning the categories and underlying concepts of a popular discourse*

Urs Geiser

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the development discourse that centres around participation and civil society – a discourse that is very dominant with concerned researchers as well as development workers. Many donor-supported projects, but also state agencies and non-governmental organisations in Pakistan (as elsewhere) are advocating (in principle) the strengthening of people's participation, and civil society participation, in livelihood-related issues and the search for sustainable development in general. The voice of the (poor) people and their communities is to be supported, and their concerns brought forward (for example through civil society organisations) into the development agenda of the state and the donors. Advocacy, the organisation of networks, joint forest management, farmers committees, village development committees,

and CBOs (community based organisations) are some of the resulting forms of translating this popular discourse into action. Interestingly, the demand for community participation and the involvement of civil society is not limited to the sphere of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but has become part and parcel of the arguments of the state and donors as well. Let us just look at three recent examples from Pakistan:

- Sungi Development Foundation (a very important and active non-governmental organisation in Pakistan) states: "At the heart of Sungi's philosophy of development lies the conviction that all policies, whether state or otherwise, must be people centred, emphasising greater participation and a voice for the most marginalised. Sungi believes that communities and citizens' groups should act as support structures for individuals so as to encourage them to take socially valuable action as well as to express their concerns. When properly endowed and informed, communities can contribute to decisions that affect them and play an invaluable role in creating a sustainable society" (Sungi Development Foundation 2000).

- The recent "Pakistan Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper" of the Government of Pakistan and the World Bank states – already in the preface: "Poverty reduction is not a battle that can be won by the efforts of any single government agency or department. In fact, it is a war that has to be fought concurrently on all fronts with keen involvement of all government agencies, the civil society, and the private sector" (GoP & WB 2001).

- Intercooperation, a Swiss development organisation, is implementing the Natural Resource Management Programme on behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The main objective of this programme is "to improve access to natural resources (land and water), to further promote sustainable low input production and market-oriented diversification, with emphasis on enhancing livelihood for the poor. Intercooperation works in collaboration with government agencies and private sector organisations (...). In the wider context of rural development, cooperation with NGOs and CBOs aims to strengthen institutions of the civil society and to advance the process of decentralisation" (Intercooperation 2002).

These concerns for participation and the strengthening of civil society (for which the above three are just examples) are crucial and essential to move towards socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable living conditions – the involved researchers, development project staff, and activists need full support in these ventures.

At times, though, the conceptual categories underlying this popular discourse, and especially the *actual practice* of this endeavour, need critical reflection. What is meant say by *community*, and how are actual state or donor activities influenced and shaped by a specific interpretation of this notion? Similarly, what is meant by *civil society*, and – following a specific understanding – who is perceived as being member of civil society (and who not)? What kind of "knowledge production" (SDPI 2002) regarding causes and remedies to development problems does take place using specific interpretations of these key categories? Critically reflecting on the actual practice of the community participation / civil society discourse is not to blame, but is considered in this paper as an essential pre-requisite for a constructive-critical dialogue between development research and development practice.

Thus, this paper discusses the notions of *community* (section 2), *civil society* (section 3) and *state* (section 4) and addresses the meaning of *participation* (section 5). It ends by sketching some critical issues that may need further attention (section 6). To illustrate the comments, insights gained during a case study on forest use in the Swat region of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) are used.[1]

2. The notion of "community"

"Community" is a very widespread notion, and it is used in many development-related concepts, such as *community* development, *community* based organisations, empowering *communities*, involving

[1] For preliminary details on this case study see Geiser 2000a and Geiser 2002.

communities in forest management, etc.

Its dominant understanding can be traced partly to Cultural Ecology (Bargatzy 1986), which in turn is based on ecological systems thinking. Ecological systems have a boundary, and regulatory processes lead to, and ensure, equilibrium conditions within the systems' boundary. Translating this thinking into the social world leads to an understanding of rural villages – *communities* – as (social) systems. The regulatory mechanisms that ensure equilibrium are for example traditional institutions (see RIVAJ in North-West Pakistan), and a "common image underlying these approaches is of harmony, equilibrium or balance between community livelihoods and natural resources ..." (Leach et al. 1997).

The notion of community can also be traced to the works of the German sociologist Toennies and his concept of *Gemeinschaft* "which represented the integrated, preindustrial, small-scale community based on kinship, friendship and neighbourhood, where social relations are intimate, enduring and multistranded." Such community was contrasted with its obverse, non-community, or *Gesellschaft* "symbolizing the impersonal, anonymous, contractual and amoral ties characteristic of modern industrial society" (Shore 1993).

Categories invented by science – such as "community" – are meant to guide empirical analytical research. In other words, the one discussed here suggests that communities really exist – and we should thus be able to identify them in our case study region of the Swat valley in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan.

Looking at one of the villages located in the Swat valley's plain area, we first find the PAKHTUN landowners. Are they living in a social system characterised by neighbourhood and harmony – as suggested by the systemic understanding of community? A closer look soon shows that they are not, but living in a highly stratified society with a few being dominant, and others depending on these leaders in a multitude of ways. Besides the Pakhtun landowners, we find many tenants (generally non-Pakktuns), and a very large number of people and families that are landless (mostly non-Pakhtuns too), much depending on the landowning groups. Among many of these villagers, tensions exist for example around land – as

manifested by the huge number of court cases pending in the valley's capital city, Mingora/Saidu Sharif. Difficulties also arise in defining the spatial boundary of the "community": while some members of the extended families of the village earn their livelihood from (local) agriculture, other family members are working in far-away localities of Pakistan (e.g. Karachi), or even abroad, in Dubai, Malaysia, or as sailors on Greek ships.

These few glimpses suffice to indicate that it is very difficult (or impossible) to identify a systems boundary, as many economic activities and social relations reach far beyond the "village community". And the other key ingredient of "community", i.e. social equilibrium, is conspicuous by its absence, as power relations are at work within this highly differentiated social arena as well – or in the words of Leach et al. (1997): "'communities' are not (...) bounded, homogeneous entities, but socially differentiated and diverse. Gender, caste, wealth, age, origins, and other aspects of social identity divide and cross-cut so-called 'community' boundaries. Rather than shared beliefs and interests, diverse and often conflicting values and resource priorities pervade social life and may be struggled and 'bargained' over." Even in traditional institutional systems such as RIVAJ, some are more equal than others, and some stick to the (traditional) rules while others do not.

Is a more remote village better suited to be labelled as "community"? A brief look at a place up-hill indicates that this is difficult as well. We find people (Gujars) who, in earlier times, were the dependent tenants of the Pakhtuns in the above-mentioned village in the plains (.hus, the social space of the plain village extended up to these hills). Many of the tenants today claim to be the owners of the land, refusing to accept their earlier status as dependents – which again leads to much social tension (see for example de Leede et al. 1999). Other "villagers" (e.g. Ajars) are landless, and depend on the "new" landowners for labour or permits to graze their goats on "community land".

In sum, what we find is not communities – in the systemic meaning of the term (which informs its use in the development enterprise) – but a highly stratified and heterogeneous local people, or local society, whose social and economic relations expand much beyond the parameter of their villages, and whose interests are

diverse. Before discussing further the implications of this for the practice of participation, we briefly address the understanding of civil society.

3. The notion of "Civil Society"

A dominant understanding of civil society today is that of a sphere of society separate from the state; a sphere where *citizens* can actively participate in *non-state institutions*, in order to influence or challenge the state's formal rule. In this understanding, emphasis is on non-state institutions, set-up and used by citizens as platforms to interact with (or challenge) the state. Along this dominant line of thinking is a recent working definition adopted by the IDS Governance Research Group:[2] "An intermediate realm situated between state and household, populated by organized groups or associations which are separate from the state, enjoy some autonomy in relations with the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests, values or identities" (Manor et al. 1999: 4).

Again, this organisational definition of a civil society (for the normative understanding of this notion see section 6) invites us to search for such *organisations* and *citizens* in our study region. In the Swat valley, these more articulate "citizens" – who may initiate and operate civil society organisations – are found for example in the area's capital town of Mingora/Saidu Sharif. They include, among others, Khans (often absentee landowners), leaders of political parties, advocates and lawyers, business people, and college teachers.

Let us now identify some of the non-state organisations and platforms set-up by these citizens in order to represent the interests of members of society. Party leaders, of course, are using political parties as platforms to mobilise and express demands, and there exists a wide range of such groupings in Swat as well. Business people have created their professional associations. Sawmill operators for example are organising themselves in the Sawmill (ARA) Owners Association – and they indeed challenge the state: there are very few "legal" sawmills in this region, and a very large number of "illegal" sawmills – from the point of view of the state's Forest Department

[2] IDS: Institute for Development Studies, Sussex, UK

which issues permits to only a few such enterprises. The advocates working at the district courts in Mingora/Saidu Sharif are organised in the Bar Association – a very important platform for local people to inform and guide their dealings with the state. And some concerned college teachers and professors have formed and registered a society to protect the environment in the city and its surroundings.

Thus, we indeed are able to identify platforms and citizens that fit the organisational definition of civil society. We could add religious groups often involved in welfare activities as well – adding to a wide array of platforms "between the individual and the state" with a wide spectrum of interests, intentions and practices. Before probing these associations further (see section 5), we first need to have a closer look at the counterpart of civil society, i.e. the state, to which civil society is generally defined *in relation to*, but is considered as constituting a separate social entity.

4. The notion of "the State"

Today's mainstream understanding of "the state" is very much a functionalist one: The modern, postcolonial nation-state with its executive bodies (line agencies) is mandated by the legislature (which represents the citizens) to undertake activities necessary to ensure the well-being of the nation and its citizens. Some time back, state departments in Pakistan were indeed labelled as "nation building departments" (Qurashi & Khan 1986). The guidelines for these state activities are given in detail in respective policies, acts, laws, and rules. To execute the activities, adequate resources are provided to the state (e.g. staff positions, buildings, TA/DA, development budgets, etc.). The judiciary in turn is to monitor and ensure proper and correct "functioning" of the modern developmental state.

Let us now search for this functionalist modern state in our case study region, focussing as an example on the Forest Department of the NWFP. We find that it is mandated (de jure) to care for the forests as prescribed in the respective forest legislation, which in turn is to guide what the staff of the department is

practicing in their daily routines. Along this functionalist understanding is the following recent statement by the NWFP Forest Department: "These renewable resources of the Province [i.e. the forests; UG] are being managed by the NWFP Forest Department for the benefit of the local communities, provincial government, national economy and the international community at large" (GoNWFP 2002: 4f). Therefore, we should be able to find "the state" in Swat, represented by its local staff, carrying out activities as given in their mandate.

We focus our search for "the state" on this Forest Department. At the field (or forest) level, the Forest Guards and Foresters are expected to care for the forest as specified in the NWFP Forest Policy, Acts and Rules. The local-level staff is guided and supervised by the more senior Range Forest Officers (RFO), Divisional Forest Officers (DFO) and Conservator of Forests (CF). Overall charge is with the Chief Conservator of Forests (CCF) in the provincial capital of Peshawar. In our empirical observations of the "ground reality", we would thus expect to find a state forest management practice that is taking place as detailed in the written texts.

In actual practice, we indeed find people who are labelled as representing, or "being", the state at local level. They carry specific designations, have offices, and receive salaries from the state. However, their *practices* do not fit the definition of their *role*: Working Plans for example – key tools translating the prescriptions of laws and rules into day-to-day practical guidelines for state forest officials – are not implemented. Despite the law's prohibition, "local people" cut trees without prior consultation of the Forest Guards. And some state representatives are joining them in this (lucrative) venture (see the many references to the *timber mafia*; e.g. Ahmed & Mahmood 1998). Representatives of the state at local level cannot just act as prescribed by the rules and regulations of the modern state, but have to operate in a highly contested and heterogeneous local space. They are exposed to the demands and pressures of influential and highly networked groups (e.g. timber merchants, firewood traders, sawmill owners). In addition, the resources (required for a descent living) provided to the state representatives – especially to those at the lowest administrative levels – are not much. There is enough incentive and pressure not to follow (functionalist)

prescriptions – and with this disappears "the state". Thus, it is indeed difficult in our case study area to identify "the state" and its proper agents according to the mainstream definition.

5. The notion of "Community/ Civil Society Participation"

This paper started with the dominant discourse of the need to strengthen *civil society* and its role in advocating for, or directly supporting, poor peoples' livelihoods, and the need for civil society and local *communities* to *participate* in the development process, and to interact with the state (or, if need arises, to challenge the state). In the previous sections, the underlying and central categories of this discourse were critically discussed. We now can re-visit the dominant discourse – and raise questions.

Let us return for a moment to Swat. Here, forests are a contested domain, and a coalition of "civil society" organisations writes – along the dominant discourse: "We believe that sustainable de-velopments of forests will not be possible unless the community living in forests gets a feeling of ownership of these forests, they are not given rights in forest management and a balance is not created between the duties and responsibilities of the forest department and the local communities" (SAFI 2000: 1). Based on the arguments developed further above, we now need to ask as to who is meant to be the "local community", who is representing "the Forest Department", and which civil society organisations are to provide the "local community" with the "feeling of ownership" (referred to as empowerment at other places).

Community: Many practitioners use, and work with, the notion of community. The formation of community organisations has become a dominant paradigm in local level development in Pakistan – also with regards to forests. Communities for example are mobilised to afforest "communal lands". Subsequently, such lands are afforested and protected. However, as studies suggest, this afforestation and protection excludes some members of the "community" from using these lands, and other members claim

ownership on these "communal lands" – a situation which indeed is to be expected when we do not follow systems thinking, and do not perceive communities as homogenous groups. Another entry point to critically review the actual developmental practice that follows the community notion, are the CBOs (community based organisations). Perceiving local communities as potential partners in development, many donor-supported projects initiated and nurtured CBOs, based on the systemic understanding of community. Few of these organisations, however, survived the moment of project closure. Many others were characterised by internal conflict already during the project period (for examples from Upper Swat see Geiser 2000b). All this suggests that "communities" in the popular sense do not exist, and that "community" is rather an invention or construction emerging from a specific development discourse.

Civil society: Then, who is invited by the development enterprise to represent the local people vis-à-vis the state, or, in other words: *who constitutes civil society*, who creates the platforms that can be used by the "citizens" to interact with, or challenge, the state?

Around 1997/98, a coalition of "civil society organisations" emerged in Pakistan with the name of Forestry Working Group. Zooming further into this coalition and its constituency in our study region of Swat, we find the society formed by the college teachers, and a group called Carvan. Together with Sungi, they mobilised local "communities" for action: "These are aimed at the development of their village and community on the one hand, and lobbying with the large forest owners and the forest bureaucracy, on the other, for changes in the system of governance and management of the forests" (Khan 2001: 293f) – a chain of arguments (i.e. a discourse in the Foucauldian sense) fully in line with the dominant organisational definition of civil society's role in development.

However, my observations suggest that Carvan was composed more or less of one (active) person, and emerged (indirectly) out of an earlier Swiss supported rural development project. After a first mobilisation campaign, which was well covered in the local press, little was heard about this group, and by today, it seems to be non-existent. However, the environmental society initially formed by the college teachers has now become *the* important "civil society

organisation" for several development donors in the region. As a matter of fact, many projects are working with "the civil society of Swat", and they almost exclusively refer to this environmental society (and one or two other organisations who, similar to Carvan, partly emerged out of previous donor-driven development projects).

The question to be raised is: who is entitled to be called legitimate representative of "the civil society of Swat"? In our research, we never came across the mentioning of the Bar Association or the Sawmill Owners, or other such bodies created by local citizens (a closer analysis would most likely reveal an even larger array of such platforms) – not to speak of religious groups.

State: Finally, the "state": Generally, development donors are basing their support to line agencies on the functionalist reading of state structures, duties, and activities. They support line agencies in institutional strengthening, in improving technical procedures, in better implementation and coordination of line agency "functions" and (increasingly), in "good governance" and policy-making. Projects even focus on supporting state agencies in evolving development or conservation strategies that should guide respective policy formulation.

In our context, improving relations between the local-level representatives of the state and "communities" can be interpreted as efforts towards good governance as well. The new draft Forest Act for the North-West Frontier Province mentions already in the preamble: "(...) it is expedient to consolidate and amend the laws relating to protection, conservation, management, and sustainable development of forests (...), to provide for community participation and modern concepts in development of the resources (...)", and one of the objectives reads: "involvement of local communities and interested parties in the formulation and implementation of forest policies and forest management" (GoNWFP 2000).

But then: how to operationalise such intentions – for example through the concept of Joint Forest Management (JFM) – when we find it difficult on the one hand to identify these state agents that are supposed to implement such prescriptions, and when we face difficulties on the other hand in disentangling the reality of complex social relations and networks of power between "local communities"

and "state representatives" – not to speak of the long history of conflict and conflict-solving arrange-ments at the local level, arrangements that all blur the division between "the locals" and "the state officials"?

6. Critical issues

First of all, and as mentioned at the outset of this paper, the concerns for participation and the strengthening of civil society are crucial and essential to move towards socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable living conditions – the involved researchers and activists indeed need full support in these ventures. Development practice, though, needs critical reflection – reflection that eventually leads to new insights.

Such critical reflection indicates that most of the ongoing development practice is guided by a specific blend of conceptual understandings, i.e.

- a working with the notion of "community" as if it really existed following an understanding which emphasises system boundary and egalitarian conditions;
- a very selective reading of who is allowed or invited to represent civil society;
- and non-realistic assumptions about the "functioning" and the role of "the state" and departmental officials.

As a consequence, a specific kind of state – civil society – community interaction emerges which (quite often) is rather detached from actual reality. As ongoing and dominant development discourses ask state and donors to better consider civil society and community, such entities are needed, and thus "constructed", or in the words of Jenkins (2001: 268): "Civil society emerges as a sort of political ombudsman, reflecting the values of impartiality, fair play, and commitment to public welfare. This niche – its value orientation and functional role – in fact bears a striking similarity to the one which donor agencies see themselves as occupying in relation to the countries to which they give aid... Perhaps it should not surprise us, after all, that aid agencies have created civil society in their own

image" (Jenkins 2001: 268).

The dominant participation / civil society discourse and practice also leads to a specific form of knowledge production. Selected civil societies organisations are invited by (specific) state agents and (specific) donors to "interact" and produce ideas about problems of communities and opportunities to overcome these problems, thus creating (specific) bodies of knowledge – knowledge (and related acting), though, that is (if our analysis is right) more of a detached and virtual nature, a knowledge that not necessarily reflects actual political situations, processes, representation and struggles.

Add to this debate the fact that a notion like civil society is not only an organisational term, but carries with it a lot of normative meanings. Some of these meanings compete with each other, depending on the reading of the term's political implications. Here, civil society is not necessarily discussed as a specific set of organisations (i.e. between individuals and state), but more as political ideas of what a "civil society" is, or in more developmental terms, what a "*sustainable society*" should look like and how it can be achieved and maintained (for an excellent discussion see Kaviraj 2001; for a summary Kumar 1993).

Thus, in addition to the (organisational) question as to who is a representative organisation of "civil society", comes the question of *what* kind of political visions regarding a "civil society" these organisations follow. And what are the related visions of say the donors that choose certain "civil society" organisations (and not choosing others)?

These are not just theoretical issues for academics to deal with, but highly political questions, as they relate to the construction and emergence of specific developmental paths. Do the outcomes of the dominant participation / civil society practice really contribute to (sustainable) development; do they address the needs of the marginal and poor (not to speak of the environment)?

As researchers and development practitioners, is it not time to question the mainstream notions of the community, civil society and the state? We need to re-debate the arrangement of these constructed social forces based on a closer analysis of power relations, on who is the legitimate representative of 'local people' and on the respective visions regarding what construes civil society. We may even use our

case study in Swat, the politics of resource access and control among diverse social actors. This will help us see sustainable development as an outcome of "negotiation, or contestation, between social actors who may have very different priorities" (Leach et al. 1997).

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